

Jessee, E. (2019) Beyond perpetrators: complex political actors surrounding the 1994 genocide in Rwanda. In: Smeulers, A., Weerdesteijn, M. and Hola, B. (eds.) *Perpetrators of International Crimes*. Oxford University Press. ISBN 9780198829997  
(doi: [10.1093/oso/9780198829997.003.0009](https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198829997.003.0009))

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## Chapter 8

# Beyond Perpetrators: Complex Political Actors surrounding the 1994 Genocide in Rwanda

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### 1. Introduction

This chapter analyses the life histories of a handful of Rwanda's convicted *génocidaires* - those individuals who were found to have some degree of criminal complicity in the 1994 genocide - for their insights on how the concept of 'the perpetrator' has been constructed and politicized in the nation's post-genocide period. During the genocide, between five hundred thousand and one million civilians, most of whom were members of the nation's ethnic Tutsi minority, were murdered by Hutu Power extremists affiliated with the ethnic Hutu majority.<sup>1</sup> The genocide came to an end with the military victory of the predominantly Tutsi, Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), a political party that was established in Uganda by refugees who had fled previous periods of political violence surrounding Rwandan independence in 1962, and subsequently invaded Rwanda in October 1990, triggering a civil war. Following its victory, the RPF invested in a simplistic official history that divides the civilian population into either 'guilty Hutu perpetrators' or 'innocent Tutsi victims'. As part of this, the government has pursued a policy of 'universal accountability', whereby alleged *génocidaires* are encouraged to publicly confess their genocide-related crimes through a variety of transitional justice mechanisms, including international and domestic trials (Gahima 2013, xxviii).<sup>2</sup> The resulting transitional justice program has met with substantial criticism for its tendency to privilege Tutsis' experiences of political violence while silencing those of the Hutu majority and indigenous Twa minority. This in turn is contributing to the maintenance of a powerful reservoir of ethnic and political tensions among Rwandans. This chapter explores these ongoing tensions through the life histories of three *génocidaires* from different regions of Rwanda. Their narratives demonstrate that many *génocidaires*' actions surrounding the genocide were far more complicated and diverse than is typically indicated by the RPF's official history. This suggests their actions are better understood by pushing beyond the limitations afforded by the popular

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<sup>1</sup> The terms Hutu, Tutsi, and Twa have a long history in Rwanda, though it is important to note that they only became indicators of a person's ethnicity during the Belgian colonial period from 1916 to 1962. Prior to this, these terms had less salience compared to other common identifiers, such as clan, and indicated a person's socio-economic status, with Tutsi subsisting primarily as pastoralists, Hutu surviving primarily through agriculture, and the term Twa being reserved for Rwanda's indigenous hunter-gatherer minority population. Because cattle are symbols of prestige in Rwanda, the Tutsi typically enjoyed positions of privilege within Rwanda's social and political hierarchy, and dominated the monarchy that ruled that region prior to Rwandan independence in 1962. In the present, ethnicity become taboo as the current government, in an effort to prevent further ethnic bloodshed, encourages Rwandans to identify according to their shared national heritage. For more on ethnicity in Rwanda at different points in the nation's past, see Eramian (2014), Newbury (1998), and Vansina, (2004, 47). Meanwhile, the number of deceased victims of the genocide is controversial, with conservative estimates concluding that between five hundred thousand and eight hundred thousand Rwandans, most of whom were Tutsi, were murdered (Des Forges 1999, 15-16). Conversely, the Rwandan government and its supporters maintain that over one million Rwandan Tutsi were murdered during this period. See, for example: Paul Kagame, "Remarks by President Paul Kagame, Kwigabuka 23, Kigali, 7 April 2017," <http://www.paulkagame.com/index.php/speeches/1814-remarks-by-president-paul-kagame-kwigabuka-23-kigali-7-april-2017> (accessed 6 July 2017).

<sup>2</sup> Formerly Rwanda's Deputy Minister of the Ministry of Justice (1996-1999) and Attorney General (1999-2003), Gerald Gahima offers a thorough overview of Rwanda's transitional justice program.

and legal labels often applied to them, such as perpetrators and *génocidaires*, particularly given how politicized these labels have become in the post-genocide period.

I begin this chapter with a brief summary of the current official narrative that dominates post-genocide Rwanda under the RPF, followed by a discussion of the methodological approach I used in working with convicted *génocidaires* and other relevant cohorts. I then consider the life history narratives of three interviewees whose experiences surrounding the genocide demonstrate the limitations of viewing them solely in terms of their criminal actions. I argue that most of the convicted *génocidaires* with whom I worked are better understood as ‘complex political actors’ - an admittedly controversial term that nonetheless more effectively encapsulates the range of actions in which they engaged during the genocide given the broader political, historical, and personal contexts in which they were embedded (Jessee 2017, 119).<sup>3</sup>

## 2. The Official History of ‘the 1994 Genocide of the Tutsi’

In the aftermath of mass atrocities, it is not unusual for post-conflict regimes to rewrite their nation’s past in a manner that serves a political purpose - ideally to promote reconciliation or establish a legally rigorous version of events, but in less ideal settings to shore up an insecure regime - even though doing so can often sow tensions among the general public.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, in Rwanda most regimes have, upon taking power, rewritten their nation’s history in a manner that better suits the ruling elites and their vision for Rwandan society.<sup>5</sup> However, it is the story of the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, and largely as disseminated by the RPF, that generally defines the nation today. Most commonly, the genocide is argued to have begun with the assassination of Hutu President Juvénal Habyarimana on 6 April 1994.<sup>6</sup> This unexpected event occurred at the height of international negotiations to end the civil war, which had polarized the population along ethnic and political lines.<sup>7</sup> Believing the RPF to be responsible for Habyarimana’s assassination, the nation’s Hutu majority allegedly turned against the Tutsi minority population.

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<sup>3</sup> As will be discussed in greater detail below, this term builds upon Erica Bouris’ work surrounding what she terms ‘complex political victims’, and Erin Baines’ work on ‘complex political perpetrators’. See Bouris (2010, 7), and Baines (2009, 163) as well as the chapter by Anderson in this book.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Finnström (2010, 135-156), Schaffer and Smith (2004), Trouillot (2015) and Wagner (2011).

<sup>5</sup> When Rwanda was ruled by the Abanyiginya monarchs, this rewriting of history was often the responsibility of court historians and storytellers who maintained the kingdom’s various oral traditions, see Jessee (2017, 4-8); and Vansina (2000, 375-414). With the start of Rwanda’s colonial period, when Rwanda became part of German East Africa (1895-1916) and Belgium-occupied Ruanda-Urundi (1916-1962), missionaries and colonial administrators rewrote Rwandan history according to their own Euro-centric views of Africa, which included racist, pseudo-scientific assumptions about the nature of the Tutsi as natural leaders (due to their alleged semi-Caucasian heritage as alleged descendants of the biblical figure, Ham), the Hutu as pure Africans best suited for physical labour, and the Twa as ‘an atavistic throwback to the apes’. For more information, see Des Forges (1999, 36-37).

<sup>6</sup> Controversy has emerged over which parties to the conflict are responsible for Habyarimana’s assassination. Soon after Habyarimana’s death, a Belgian journalist reported that two French soldiers were responsible for the assassination, while Etienne Sengegera, the Rwandan ambassador to the DRC, alleged that Belgian peacekeepers were to blame (Prunier 2005, 213-214). RPF supporters maintain that Habyarimana’s inner circle had him assassinated following his decision to sign the Arusha Accords because they felt he had betrayed the Hutu cause (Des Forges 1999, 182). In 2010, the Rwandan government released the Mutsinzi Report (Republic of Rwanda 2010), which argues that the Rwandan Armed Forces were responsible for engineering and implementing Habyarimana’s assassination. These findings were loosely confirmed by the preliminary Trévidic report (Trédivic & Poux 2012; see also Schofield 2012), though critics have noted that both the Mutsinzi and Trévidic reports failed to take into consideration the testimonies of ex-RPF combatants who claim Kagame was responsible for orchestrating Habyarimana’s assassination. To this end, André Guichaoua, a sociologist and expert witness for the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR), has concluded based on evidence collected and verified by ICTR prosecutors that the RPF was most likely responsible for Habyarimana’s assassination (Guichaoua 2015, 144-145).

<sup>7</sup> For more on the origins of the RPF, see Guichaoua (2015) and Kimonyo (2016).

Over the next three months, the RPF maintains that one million innocent Tutsi civilians were killed, while an estimated two hundred fifty thousand Tutsi women were raped, resulting in the birth of an estimated two to five thousand children conceived through sexual assaults.<sup>8</sup> An estimated 85% of the population witnessed the violent murder of one or more close family members or friends, resulting in high rates of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), among other negative legacies.<sup>9</sup>

The genocide was formally ended by the RPF's military victory on 17 July 1994. The RPF's victory is largely attributed to the leadership skills of one man - Paul Kagame - who today serves as the nation's President. In the years since what has been termed in official parlance as the '1994 genocide of the Tutsi', Kagame has been widely celebrated in domestic and international media as the saviour of the Rwandan people and model leader for Africa.<sup>10</sup> First responders to the genocide promoted an image of Kagame, and the RPF more generally, as a hardworking, benevolent force dedicated to the reconciliation and advancement of the Rwandan people. To date, the international community largely remains impressed by the high degree of political stability in Rwanda, and the RPF's commitment to rapid development in the areas of information technology, agriculture, education, health care, gender equality, and national unity and reconciliation, even as accounts of Kagame's authoritarian tendencies proliferate. Similarly celebrated in many contexts is the Rwandan government's commitment to promoting transitional justice and legal accountability in the post-genocide period.<sup>11</sup>

As the atrocities in Rwanda were unfolding, the international community debated whether they constituted genocide as defined by the UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide.<sup>12</sup> The scale and brutality of the violence prompted the UN to establish the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR), which was tasked with trying those individuals who were believed to have committed the most egregious violations of international law that occurred between January and December 1994, most notably genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes. However, in the aftermath of the genocide, the RPF had arrested an estimated hundred fifty thousand suspected *génocidaires* whose crimes ranged from mass murder and sexual assault to looting (Tertsakian 2008). Resenting the UN's decision to base the tribunal in Arusha, Tanzania rather than Rwanda, the RPF decided to empower Rwanda's national court system to try alleged *génocidaires*. However, the national courts were incapable of bringing this number of suspected *génocidaires* to trial in a timely manner, and so the government subsequently invested in *gacaca* - a community-based dispute resolution mechanism adapted from early Rwandan history (Gahima 2013, xxviii).<sup>13</sup> Over a decade, an estimated 1,958,634 genocide-related cases were tried through *gacaca*, providing important

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<sup>8</sup> As mentioned in footnote 1, the number of deceased victims of the 1994 genocide is a point of controversy. For more on the high rates of sexual violence during the genocide, see René Degni-Ségui (1996) and Nowroji (1996).

<sup>9</sup> According to a 1996 study conducted by UNICEF, almost one-third of Rwanda's civilian population exhibited PTSD resulting from their experiences during the genocide. For more on how this diagnosis of mass trauma has played out in the context of post-genocide Rwanda in the years since this determination, see Guglielmo (2015, 148) and Pham et al. (2004).

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Kinzer (2008, 3). See also interviews by former Heads of State Tony Blair and Bill Clinton (BBC News 2013a and 2013b).

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Blair (2014), Gourevitch (2009), and Ong in Mbyo (2017).

<sup>12</sup> The Genocide Convention defines genocide in Article II as 'any attempt of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such: (a) Killing members of the group; (b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; (c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction...; (d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births; (e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.' See Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, 9 December 1948.

<sup>13</sup> For more on *gacaca*, particularly how Rwandan civilians responded to the courts, see Ingelaere (2016).

though carefully circumscribed opportunities for public discussion of the genocide (Rutayisire & Richters 2014, 2).

While holding legally accountable those alleged perpetrators who were deemed to have some degree of criminal responsibility for the genocide, Rwanda's transitional justice program has largely reinforced the RPF's official narrative of the '1994 genocide of the Tutsi'. In formally recognising only Tutsi civilians among the genocide's victims, this label leaves little room for discussion of the broader atrocities that occurred surrounded the civil war and genocide, and the suffering and losses endured by Hutu and Twa civilians, in addition to the Tutsi minority. The RPF defends its official history on the grounds that it is essential for overwriting the bad governance and genocide ideology that dominated Rwanda's public sphere prior to the genocide, thereby diminishing ethnic divisions among its populace and preventing further ethnic bloodshed (Burnet 2012, 92-93; Jessee 2017, 25).

However, experts are divided regarding the extent to which the RPF's official narrative is actually serving to reinforce, rather than diminish, tensions among the population. To cite but one critic of the RPF's official narrative, Jennie Burnet has criticized the RPF's program of nationalized commemoration for creating a 'shibboleth of genocide' that permits people to speak publicly about their experiences of the genocide only in terms that uphold the dichotomous official narrative in which Tutsi are innocent victims and Hutu are perpetrators (Burnet 2012, 128). The lived reality of many Rwandans, however, does not reinforce this dichotomy, and indeed complicates the RPF's official history in ways that offer important insights for understanding individuals' diverse actions surrounding the genocide, whether as victims, survivors, bystanders, ex-combatants, and/or perpetrators (Jessee 2017). This statement is particularly accurate with regards to the experiences and perceptions of Rwanda's convicted *génocidaires*, many of whom regard themselves simultaneously as having been victims, bystanders, rescuers, and perpetrators at different points during the genocide, despite having been identified solely as perpetrators by the state.

### 3. Approaching Rwanda's *Génocidaires*

Before delving into examples from my research on Rwanda, it is important to say a few words about the methodological approach that underpins this chapter, which is predominantly informed by the practice of oral history. As both a methodology and an end result, oral historians typically rely on the collection, analysis and dissemination of interviews as a means of engaging with those versions of the past that throughout history have been largely excluded from official historical knowledge, ideally resulting in an intimate 'view from below'.<sup>14</sup> In my case, I used a combination of life history interviews and thematic interviews, meeting with each participant a minimum of two and as many as eight times depending on their schedule and level of engagement during eight months of fieldwork in rural communities - including five prisons - across Rwanda in 2007 and 2008.<sup>15</sup>

During this period, I worked closely with Rwandan research assistants and prisoners who had been trained to prepare other prisoners for *gacaca* to recruit participants. Because I was not permitted to enter the main prison buildings, these *gacaca* representatives approached their

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<sup>14</sup> For more information, see Abrams (2015, 2).

<sup>15</sup> I have also conducted numerous research trips to Rwanda since 2008, though I have not continued doing interviews in the prisons. For more on the broader research programme underlying this chapter, which involved multiple interviews with over 100 survivors, bystanders, ex-combatants, government officials, and other parties to the conflict, see Jessee (2017).

fellow prisoners on my behalf, explained the nature of my research and asked whether they might be interested in meeting with me to discuss participation in the project.<sup>16</sup> If they agreed, informed consent was established prior to the start of interviews and revisited throughout our work together to ensure interviewees were aware of their rights surrounding the research project, and could make informed decisions regarding the degree of confidentiality they wanted and whether they needed to place any special conditions upon the future use of their narratives. In instances where people consented to participate in the project, the interviews began with me encouraging them to narrate their life history in as little or as much detail as they thought necessary in order to impart a solid understanding of who they were and what they had experienced. During these initial life history interviews, I asked few questions. Once participants felt they had sufficiently narrated their life histories, we moved on to thematic interviews, in which I asked questions specific to my research interests and informed by the events and encounters they had previously mentioned. This interview process took anywhere from two to twelve hours.

In most instances, participants preferred to be interviewed in Kinyarwanda, with a research assistant providing simultaneous translation in English. Because I was not permitted to making audio recordings, I kept careful notes that I then checked with participants in subsequent visits and interviews to minimize errors in the translation, clarify points of confusion, and make sure I was not misinterpreting their narratives. In addition, I often vetted preliminary findings with them to elicit their feedback and encourage deeper reflection on their experiences relative to other Rwandans I was interviewing.

This methodology allowed me to access a range of experiences and perspectives on Rwandan history and its interpretation over time, and document the often-shifting perspectives convicted *génocidaires* entertained about their actions surrounding the genocide. It further enabled me to better contextualize the narratives that emerged not in terms of true or false, historical accuracy or inaccuracy, but instead as crucial for revealing of what was psychologically true for participants as they worked toward constructing their life histories in a manner that facilitated psychic comfort or ‘composure’.<sup>17</sup> Of particular importance, this methodology resulted in narratives through which convicted *génocidaires* effectively challenged the RPF’s official history surrounding the genocide, particularly the false dichotomy it promotes between victim/survivors and *génocidaires*/perpetrators. It made visible the complexity of convicted *génocidaires*’ experiences, most notably in terms of the shifting motivations that often characterized individual perpetrators’ decisions to engage in violence from one day to the next, as well as the small acts of rescue and kindness in which they frequently engaged to save those Tutsi they knew were not a threat. It likewise made visible the choiceless decisions that many

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<sup>16</sup> The terms of my university ethics approval meant that I was only permitted to interview perpetrators who had completed the trial and appeals process in Rwanda. This measure was intended to prevent any expectations on the part of the prisoners and prison officials that I might be able to somehow intervene in ongoing legal investigations. The reality, however, was far more complicated than the ethics committee anticipated. While all of the people I interviewed had been tried for or confessed to at least one set of charges rendering them ‘convicted *génocidaires*’, in several instances I learned during the interview process that new charges were pending or had been brought against them, meaning they were awaiting or undergoing further trials. In these instances, I informed them that I was not able to influence criminal proceedings in any manner, and warned them against discussing any crimes for which they had not already been prosecuted.

<sup>17</sup> Historian Graham Dawson understands composure as a two-fold phenomenon whereby narrators simultaneously compose a narrative and imbue it with elements that provide them with personal equanimity and psychic comfort. He notes that: ‘The story that is actually told is always the one preferred amongst other possible versions, and involves a striving, not only for a formally satisfying narrative or a coherent version of events, but also for a version of the self that can be lived with in relative psychic comfort’ (Dawson 1994, 22-23).

Rwandans - not just convicted *génocidaires* - made as part of negotiating their survival during the genocide. These decisions included everything from abandoning loved ones to certain death, to contributing to the torture, rape, and murder of their Tutsi compatriots, to engaging in retaliatory massacres of unarmed Hutu civilians, for which no prosecutions have occurred.

#### **4. The Politics of Perpetration in Rwanda's Post-Genocide Period: Three Case Studies**

Having briefly outlined the current official history of Rwanda surrounding the genocide and having explained the methodology that informed this chapter, I now turn my attention to three case studies that demonstrate the complexity of convicted *génocidaires*' experiences prior to, during, and after the genocide. The first focuses on a man named Michel who, prior to the genocide had worked as a salesman with minimal political ambitions, but who during the genocide had actively participated in the torture and murder of his Tutsi compatriots, making him a fairly 'typical *génocidaire*' in terms of the literature on Rwanda.<sup>18</sup> The second case study considers the life history of Devota, a peasant woman who transgressed contemporary Rwandan gender norms to allegedly become an enthusiastic perpetrator of the genocidal violence in her community, rendering her a 'monster' in the eyes of the prison officials where she was interned and the *gacaca* officials responsible for judging her case, as well as her fellow convicted *génocidaires*. Third, I consider the narrative of Elliot, a rare example of a Rwandan of Tutsi heritage who, during the genocide, had organized atrocities against his own people.

##### **4.1 A Typical *Génocidaire*? Michel**

Michel remembered his father as an important figure in his life and a leader within their community, whom people often turned to for support due to his reputation for fairness. However, soon after the RPF invaded Rwanda in 1990, Rwandan Patriotic Army (RPA) soldiers came to his house and arrested his father on the grounds that local Tutsi had told them that he was harbouring Hutu extremists in his home. He was taken away with another thirty Hutu men from the community, and they were publicly tortured and executed. This experience marked a critical turning point in Michel's life. Whereas previously, Michel could not recall any periods of overt conflict between Hutu and Tutsi in his community and claimed he had no strong sentiments regarding his ethnic heritage, in part due to the fact that his mother was Tutsi, he suddenly found himself fearful about what an RPF victory would mean for Rwandans' well-being. He joined the Hutu-dominated political party of then-President Juvénal Habyarimana - the *Mouvement Républicain National pour la Démocratie et le Développement* (MNRD) - and began attending political meetings and civil defence training sessions aimed at defending his family and community against further RPA aggression. With the Habyarimana's assassination on 6 April 1994, however, Michel recalled that these political meetings and training sessions suddenly took on a different tone. Whereas they had initially focused on resisting RPA movements in the region, the rhetoric after Habyarimana's death became explicitly anti-Tutsi. Michel was told that the RPF was responsible for Habyarimana's assassination, and the militias were encouraged to actively kill their Tutsi neighbours who, their superiors claimed, were secretly supporting the RPA.

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<sup>18</sup> Pseudonyms are used throughout this chapter to protect the identities of the Rwandans who shared their life histories with me. Generally speaking, the majority of Rwanda's *génocidaires* were, at the time of the genocide, young to middle-aged men from rural communities with moderate levels of education and few prospects for advancement in their communities. They rarely had criminal backgrounds or had engaged in violence prior to the genocide, and in terms of their motives for killing their Tutsi compatriots frequently cited factors that went well beyond the commonly cited ethnic hatred of the Tutsi. See, for example, Fujii (2008, 568-597), Jessee (2015), Mironko (2004) and Straus (2006).

The genocide in Michel's community began with the slaughter of the local Tutsi's cattle - a symbolic act that had been used during previous periods of political violence in Rwanda to signal the start of hostilities against the Tutsi - and soon after escalated to include massacring Tutsi civilians at the roadblocks.<sup>19</sup> Michel claimed he was initially reluctant to kill his Tutsi compatriots, but feared that if he refused, the Hutu extremists would kill him. He claimed he had only killed sparingly, though he was present at a number of massacres where large numbers of Tutsi were murdered. Having proven his loyalty to the Hutu Power movement, two weeks into the genocide Michel was given a position as a district official after Hutu Power extremists executed his predecessor for refusing to facilitate the murder of Tutsi civilians. In this position, Michel oversaw the massacre of his community's Tutsi population, eventually including his mother and her extended family. All the while, he claimed he believed he was doing what he could to protect his family and community from the RPA and the Hutu Power extremists. And while he felt remorse for his role in the genocide, he believed he had no choice but to participate given the political and personal circumstances in which he was embedded.

This summary, taken from a series of life history interviews that I conducted with Michel in 2008, demonstrates some of the critical challenges that surround the study of *génocidaires* in post-genocide Rwanda: most notably, the complicated nature of people's experiences and the at times contradictory ways that they make sense of their criminal actions. In the immediate aftermath of the genocide, Michel was arrested by the RPF for his role in overseeing the massacres in his community, and as part of the broader campaign to ensure universal accountability for the genocide, he was imprisoned, confessed before *gacaca*, and was eventually sentenced to eighteen years in prison. The judges regarded the evidence against him - primarily witness testimonies from local genocide survivors - as clear-cut, and he was largely accepting of his crimes and sentence, even if he felt there were mitigating circumstances that made resistance to the Hutu Power extremists impossible.

To this end, Michel fits the pattern of a fairly typically *génocidaire* in that he was a middle-aged family man with a job who had an average level of education, and who had no prior criminal record (Straus 2006, 96). He was gradually drawn into the violence for a range of reasons, which at least initially, had little to do with virulent anti-Tutsi hatred. He admitted to being very fearful of the RPF, and clearly held them responsible for his father's murder, but it took time and consistent exposure to Hutu Power rhetoric to reach a point where he was willing to engage in atrocities against Tutsi civilians, including members of his immediate family, due to their potential support for the RPF, or their potential to make him look disloyal in the eyes of the Hutu Power officials to whom he answered. He was also fairly typical in that he was regarded within the prison as a relatively successful example of Rwanda's transitional justice program: an individual whose crimes during the genocide were obvious, who had given a

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<sup>19</sup> Rwanda experienced earlier periods of political violence during the Hutu Revolution from 1959 to 1962, and related to the so-called '*inyenzi* incursions' in 1963, and again in 1973 just before the bloodless coup through which Habyarimana became president. During the Hutu Revolution, the Tutsi were persecuted and in some instances massacred, but largely due to their perceived political allegiance to the Tutsi-dominated monarchy that had ruled Rwanda prior to independence in 1962. Many Tutsi fled Rwanda and settled elsewhere in the Great Lakes region of Africa as refugees. After independence, Tutsi were persecuted in response to efforts by Tutsi refugees living in neighbouring countries to destabilize, through targeted attacks on shipments and border posts, the regime of Grégoire Kayibanda (r. 1962-1973), resulting in an outcry from international observers that the Tutsi were being subject to genocide. Throughout Kayibanda's time in power, he gained a reputation for using the Tutsi as scapegoats, inciting anti-Tutsi violence as a means of distracting citizens from the widespread corruption and favouritism that characterized his government (Lemarchand 2000).



relatively thorough and appropriately remorseful confession, and whose sentencing was thus in keeping with Rwandan efforts to promote national unity and reconciliation.<sup>20</sup>

However, despite the fact that Michel's narrative largely upheld the current official narrative of the '1994 genocide of the Tutsi', there were times when Michel clearly resisted the *génocidaire* label, and instead positioned himself as a victim, bystander, and/or rescuer. His father's murder by RPA troops was arguably the clearest experience in his mind that rendered him a victim, as he argued that without the death of his father, he never would have joined the MRND or the civilian defence militia in his community, nor would he have seen the RPF as anything other than a new form of political opposition. It is important to note that the RPF has rarely pursued justice on behalf of civilians, like Michel's father, who were allegedly victims of extrajudicial killing by RPA troops during the civil war. Similarly, the RPF had yet to make reparations to his family or the families of other Hutu civilians whose loved ones were murdered surrounding the genocide.<sup>21</sup> Michel emphasized this throughout our interviews, as he argued that it was wrong that justice for the suffering endured by Tutsi victims of the genocide was being prioritized over justice for the suffering experienced by Hutu civilians who suffered similar atrocities once the RPA had taken control of their communities. To that end, he did not see the atrocities perpetrated by either party to the conflict as inherently genocidal, recalling that at the time everyone thought they were at war.

He likewise portrayed the war as necessary, from his perspective, to prevent Rwanda from once again coming under Tutsi control. Michel, like many of the *génocidaires* with whom I worked, had gradually come to associate the RPF with the Tutsi-dominated monarchy that had ruled during Rwanda's pre-colonial and colonial periods. Among the Hutu peasantry in Rwanda, there was a tendency to recall the monarchy as an institution that thrived by enslaving the Hutu majority by making their access to cattle and land dependent on their willingness to demonstrate absolute loyalty to a Tutsi patron.<sup>22</sup> Michel was similarly well-versed in a host of stories about the monarchy in which the *abami* (kings) and their *abagabekazi* (queen mothers) came across as enthusiastic murderers and torturers of Hutu civilians for no other reason than they regarded the Hutu as inferior.<sup>23</sup> For these reasons, he argued the Hutu were historically oppressed by the Tutsi, resulting in psychic wounds that were easily reopened following the RPA invasion and their attacks on Hutu civilians. Stories such as these, from his perspective,

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<sup>20</sup> An important part of Rwanda's post-genocide transitional justice program and the nation's broader plans to promote national unity and reconciliation has involved *génocidaires* willingly confessing to the crimes they committed during the genocide, and asking the survivors they harmed for forgiveness, at times accompanied by different forms of reparations. For more information, see the report of the National Unity and Reconciliation Commission (2007).

<sup>21</sup> Though controversial, international human rights organizations including the United Nations have identified various small targeted attacks on Hutu civilians in communities that came under RPF control during the civil war and genocide, and in those areas of the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) that came under the control of RPF proxy militia groups during the First and Second Congo Wars. See, for example, Des Forges (1999, 705), report by United Nations High Commission for Refugees (1994), and report by the United Nations (2010).

<sup>22</sup> In practice, the exploitative nature of *ubuhake* (cattle contracts) and *ubureetwa* (corvée labour) were likely determined by the specific relationship between a client and their patron. In the case of *ubuhake*, a patron gave a cow to a client in exchange for their loyalty, but neither the patron nor the client had to be of a particular ethnic heritage, nor did the court control all cattle. For this reason, historians such as Catharine Newbury have argued its reputation as being exploitative toward the Hutu is exaggerated. Conversely, in the case of *ubureetwa*, the patron provided a client with access to land in exchange for their loyalty and a share of the harvest. However, because most land was controlled by the royal court through its hierarchy of chiefs and sub-chiefs, this institution was consistently a source of tension between the predominantly Tutsi court notables and the predominantly Hutu peasants who relied on subsistence agriculture. For more information, see Newbury (1980).

<sup>23</sup> For more on this trend, see Jessee and Watkins (2014, 39–40); and Jessee (2017, 157–158).

made it easier for Hutu like himself to accept and even directly participate in the massacre of their Tutsi compatriots during the genocide.

However, Michel consistently returned to the subject of rescue during our interviews, stressing his efforts to protect those Tutsi whom he knew personally were no threat to the Hutu or Rwandans' well-being more generally. In the early days of the genocide, he tried to save his mother and her extended family from harm, as he knew they were good people and did not support the RPF. His decision to join the MRND and participate in civilian defence training was in part motivated by his desire to protect his family. However, once he was promoted within the district-level government, the pressure he felt to prove that he was a 'good Hutu' intensified as he came under increased scrutiny.<sup>24</sup> Eventually, when his superiors realized that Michel's mother and her family were not on the district's list of Tutsi who had been killed, he was forced to turn them over. He did not provide specific details, but admitted that they had been massacred toward the end of the genocide in his community, along with a number of other Tutsi civilians who had been hidden by well-meaning Hutu whose 'deception' had been discovered.

#### **4.2 A 'True Monster': Devota**

Compared to Michel, Devota was unusual, representing one of the comparatively rare Rwandan women who, in opposition to contemporary Rwandan gender norms that largely prohibited women's participation in physical violence, allegedly committed atrocities during the genocide.<sup>25</sup> Prior to our first meeting, Devota was described to me by prison officials as a monster who, during the genocide, had invented particularly brutal ways to kill Tutsi women and children. As further evidence of her fearsome nature, a prison official told me that she had been pregnant at the time, a condition that would have meant she could have been excused from participating in the violence if she had wanted. Furthermore, her crimes were apparently so abhorrent that several of her neighbours had voluntarily testified against her before *gacaca*, at which point she had become defiant and remorseless, refusing to confess to her crimes. As a result, she received a fairly heavy sentence for a Category Two *génocidaire* who maintained they had committed no murders or related acts of violence - 15 years.<sup>26</sup>

Indeed, throughout our interviews Devota insisted she was 'just a normal person' who was in no way capable of the crimes for which she had been sentenced, and instead had been unjustly imprisoned on the basis of petty lies and jealousies. She explained that the *gacaca* judges had unanimously found her guilty of killing Tutsi women and children by stabbing them with small

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<sup>24</sup> For more on the extent to which social ties were essential for motivating ordinary civilians to participate in the genocide, see Fujii (2008).

<sup>25</sup> Early estimates published after the Rwandan genocide suggested that between two and three thousand Rwandan women actively participated in the violence. However, more recent figures emerging from *gacaca* proceedings reveal that 96,653 women were tried by the courts, mostly for property crimes, such as looting. For more information, see African Rights (1995) and Brown (2014, 460-461).

<sup>26</sup> Rwanda recognizes four categories of perpetrators, depending on the nature and severity of their crimes. Category One is reserved for high-level organizers of the violence, as well as those individuals who committed acts of sexual violence. Category Two includes those individuals who committed homicide or other serious assaults that resulted in death, while Category Three covers other serious assaults against individuals that did not necessarily result in the person's death. Finally, Category Four addresses crimes against property, such as looting, the destruction of victims' property, or the killing or theft of victims' cattle. For more information, see Republic of Rwanda, Organic Law No. 40.2000 of January 26, 2001 Setting up Gacaca Jurisdictions and Organizing Prosecutions for Offences Constituting the Crime of Genocide or Crimes Against Humanity Committed Between October 1, 1990 and December 31, 1994, available at <http://jurisafrika.org/docs/statutes/ORGANIC%20LAW%20N0%2040.pdf> (accessed 17 May 2017).

wooden skewers used for cooking meat brochettes, despite her argument that she was too weak to commit such atrocities. However, she claimed that her only crime during the genocide was to witness a Tutsi man being killed by one of her neighbours - a neighbour who after the genocide had threatened her to remain silent about his crime. The neighbour's victim had a reputation for being proud and selfish, and so Devota did not intervene to stop the murder, and indeed, had kept silent about the attack. The charges against her, she maintained, were the result of another neighbour, who after Devota refused to sell her cousin her land, had – out of anger - invented the story of Devota killing Tutsi woman and children during a massacre at the local church. Devota believed that her arrest was intended to prompt her husband to sell their land to the neighbour's cousin and move away, in an effort to minimize the social stigma they would otherwise endure for having a *génocidaire* in the family.<sup>27</sup>

Thus throughout our interviews, Devota simultaneously rejected the *génocidaire* label, and claimed space for herself as a victim during and after the genocide. She condemned the RPF for imprisoning her without a fair trial, and argued that as a result she was no longer Rwandan or a woman - that both aspects of her identity had been stripped from her during her imprisonment and trial before *gacaca* (Jessee 2015). She noted that in Rwandan culture, a woman's worth was determined by her status as a good mother and wife, specifically her ability to maintain a good home for her husband and children. Yet Devota noted that she had been denied the opportunity to do this since her arrest in 2001, and as a result, her family had rejected her and refused to visit her in prison. This kind of stigmatization of *génocidaires* was not unusual: indeed, many of the *génocidaires* with whom I worked noted that their extended family and friends had abandoned them following their arrest because they knew it was important not to show support for *génocidaires* given the severity of the crimes of which they had been accused.

However, Devota argued, it was worse for women like her because according to Rwandan culture, women were supposed to be pure and incapable of harming others. Women who transgressed these norms to engage in violence were more harshly stigmatized compared to their male counterparts, and she cited evidence of this from her everyday life in the prison, as well as her experiences with *gacaca* proceedings. Within the prison, Devota noted that women were restricted to a particular area of the prison where they lived, and made and repaired prisoners' uniforms. They were not permitted to perform community labour in the surrounding fields, where prisoners grew crops for their meals. In addition, Devota thought the shapeless pink prison uniforms worn by *génocidaires* were designed to obscure women prisoners' bodies and sense of individuality. Combined with the shaved hairstyle demanded by the prison authorities, which was intended to prevent the spread of lice, Devota felt that there was nothing to distinguish her from the other women prisoners. She argued this inflicted unnecessary suffering upon the women and sowed conflict among them.

In terms of *gacaca*, Devota argued that she was treated unfairly during her trial. Because the charges against her were fabricated, she thought the judges should have treated her more leniently. Instead, the judges chose to privilege her neighbours' testimonies and gave her a very long sentence, which she claimed she could not appeal as she could not find anyone who believed in her innocence. She felt that this was a common experience among Rwandan women who were accused of having participated in the genocide: because they were women, and it was taboo for Rwandan women to participate in violence, particularly against other women and

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<sup>27</sup> While many Rwandans have convicted *génocidaires* in their families, people often distance themselves from them lest their support for their loved one be misinterpreted by the authorities as support for their alleged genocidal actions or resistance to national unity and reconciliation, prompting the authorities to take a negative interest (Tertsakian 2011, 212).

children, she felt women *génocidaires* received longer sentences than their male counterparts.<sup>28</sup> She regarded them as victims of gender-based discrimination, in addition to the usual complaints cited by *génocidaires*, such as the difficult living conditions in the prisons, the manipulative and coercive practices of the Hutu Power extremists, and the unfair nature of Rwanda's transitional justice program.

#### 4.3 A Tutsi Génocidaire? Elliot's Story

Finally, Elliot represented a very small cohort among the *génocidaires* who are rarely discussed in the context of Rwanda's genocide: namely, those Tutsi who, for different reasons, committed atrocities against other Tutsi. I met Elliot in one of the prisons when he was asked by the prison director to help me recruit potential interviewees who fit the ethics criteria to which I was bound. As my interviews progressed, Elliot asked if I would be willing to interview him as well, as he had an interesting story that he had never told before.

Elliot's narrative began with a confession that he claimed no one in the prison knew: he was not Hutu, but Tutsi. He said that his parents had withheld his true ethnicity from him during his youth to protect his father and his father's family's reputation as respected members of the community. However, his childhood had been marked by rumours that people often refused to discuss in his presence. He remembered periods where his father's professed hatred of the Tutsi put a strain on his relationship with Elliot and Elliot's mother, particularly when Elliot decided to marry a Tutsi woman. When Habyarimana became president in 1973, Elliot likewise recalled that some of his neighbours had accused his family of being of mixed ethnicity, though his parents had quickly refuted these claims. Such rumours, Elliot noted, were not uncommon during periods of political and ethnic tension in Rwanda, particularly when the rumours' authors felt they could profit from exposing the accused as spies and political subversives.

However, when the civil war began Elliot's neighbours began circulating the rumours regarding his family's alleged Tutsi heritage anew. While drinking in a local bar, Elliot was confronted by someone who claimed that his father was a Tutsi born of an affair between his grandmother and a wealthy Tutsi man who had once lived in their community. The man claimed that Elliot's father had rejected his Tutsi heritage after his biological father had refused to recognize him, making him ineligible to inherit any of his biological father's wealth and property after his death. When Elliot confronted his mother with this story, she confirmed that the rumours were true. Elliot recalled that the sudden surprise of learning he was actually Tutsi prompted him to become angry and reject, like his father, his Tutsi heritage. He returned to the bar and threatened to kill anyone who continued to spread rumours that he was anything other than a loyal Hutu.

As the civil war continued, Elliot started to become increasingly interested in politics and with the creation of the *Coalition pour la Défense de la République* (CDR) became one of its most active and outspoken advocates in his community. His political career within the CDR

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<sup>28</sup> This was a common complaint among the rural women *génocidaires* that I interviewed. However, the reality is likely more complex. Legal theorist Nicole Hogg has studied this phenomenon, and found that women *génocidaires* who participated indirectly in the genocide frequently received preferential treatment from judges. Hogg argues it emerged from the phenomenon whereby 'male witnesses, investigators, prosecutors and judges are so infected by gender stereotypes that they either cannot perceive of women as criminals or feel protective towards them in spite of their suspected or proven criminality.' However, when direct criminal responsibility for murder, mutilation, or other serious crimes was established, female *génocidaires* were 'regarded as "evil" or "non-women" and treated with the full force of the law' (Hogg 2010, 81; 71).

advanced quickly, and with the start of the genocide, Elliot was charged with organizing roadblocks and massacres, and maintaining a list of Tutsi who had escaped the Hutu Power extremists' attacks. However, Elliot maintained that he had actually saved several Tutsi from his district by listing them as deceased, when in fact he knew they were hiding or had fled the area. This ensured that the Hutu Power extremists stopped searching for them, dramatically increasing their chances of survival. Elliot argued that his efforts had resulted in a much higher survival rate for Tutsi from his community compared to surrounding districts, and in the immediate aftermath of the genocide, claimed that he had been celebrated as a rescuer.

However, Elliot's efforts on behalf of the Hutu Power extremists were ultimately reported by his own family. As the RPF began hunting alleged *génocidaires* across Rwanda, they feared that his involvement with the CDR during the genocide would render them all vulnerable to government persecution unless they clearly condemned his actions. He subsequently confessed before *gacaca* as a Category One *génocidaire* even though he maintained he had never directly killed anyone, and was sentenced to 5 years. Elliot was scheduled for release soon after, as he had already spent 5 years in prison awaiting trial, and was sent to *ingando* ('re-education camps' organized by the Rwandan government) to prepare to return to his community.<sup>29</sup> However, while he was attending *ingando*, a group of survivors from Elliot's community made new allegations against him, claiming that he had murdered several Tutsi during the genocide. As a result, he was returned to prison to await the outcome of the new investigation. The investigators ultimately failed to acquire any new evidence against him, and so Elliot was once again sent to *ingando* to prepare for his release. However, two days before he was scheduled to return to his home, the survivors in his community levied new allegations against him, this time claiming that he had collaborated with the local police during massacres of Tutsi civilians. Elliot was thus still in prison awaiting the results of this new investigation when we met, even though he insisted he was innocent of the new crimes of which he was accused.

Elliot believed that survivors in his community were determined to keep him in prison because he came from a family of mixed ethnicity - particularly his father's not-so-secret Tutsi heritage - and yet had decided to participate in the genocide. Several members of his family had been murdered during the genocide for being Tutsi or alleged *ibytso* ('accomplices of the enemy', a term used by Hutu Power extremists in reference to suspected RPF collaborators) after - faced with the option of abandoning their Tutsi spouses and children to certain death - they chose to be murdered alongside their loved ones. According to Elliot, families like his who blurred the boundaries between the RPF's preferred dichotomy of 'innocent Tutsi victims' and 'guilty Hutu perpetrators' were frequently discriminated against in the post-genocide period, both in the transitional justice system and in everyday life, leading him to believe that Rwandans of mixed ethnicity would 'never get peace'.

However, Elliot recognized that his situation would worsen dramatically if the authorities ever learned that he was actually Tutsi, rather than Hutu. He believed that if his Tutsi heritage became known to the authorities, they would kill him for the shame he brought upon his family, community and nation for having aided the torture and murder of his fellow Tutsi. However, Elliot claimed that situations like his were not uncommon during the genocide in his community, as several of his Tutsi neighbours perpetrated atrocities against other Tutsi in a

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<sup>29</sup> *Ingando* has been adapted from a pre-colonial form of communal retreat through which Rwandans 'shared in decisions on war and peace and how Rwanda was governed' (Nantulya 2006, 48). In modern Rwanda, *ingando* refers to either solidarity camps where politicians, civil society leaders, and university students undergo 'a form of political indoctrination for those who occupy, or will occupy, leadership positions,' or mandatory re-education camps for *génocidaires* and other criminals who are preparing to return to their communities (Thomson 2011, 334).

desperate attempt to save their lives and those of their loved ones.<sup>30</sup> Following the RPF military victory, he said that RPA troops made a special effort to murder Tutsi *génocidaires* for having betrayed their own people, prompting Elliot to be especially secretive about his ethnicity.

## 5. From *Génocidaires* to Complex Political Actors

Taken together, the narratives provided by Michel, Devota, and Elliot are broadly representative of the complex nature of the twenty life histories I documented as part of my efforts to better understand how and why Rwandans became perpetrators of genocide. The resulting life histories effectively challenge popular and official perceptions of what it means to be a victim/survivor or perpetrator/*génocidaire* in the context of the Rwandan genocide. Indeed, all of the convicted *génocidaires* with whom I worked cited a host of reasons why they regarded themselves as victims surrounding the genocide, from the alleged oppression of their Hutu ancestors under previous periods of Tutsi rule, to the torture and murder of Hutu family members during the civil war and genocide, to the discrimination and abuse they experienced within Rwanda's post-genocide transitional justice program. To this end, in instances where the *génocidaires* I interviewed were willing to speak openly about the atrocities they had perpetrated, they rarely expressed enthusiasm in committing these crimes, nor did they attribute their actions to deep-seated anti-Tutsi hatred. While a few *génocidaires* admitted taking advantage of the violence to settle old scores with Tutsi with whom they had a history of interpersonal conflict, most *génocidaires* attributed their actions to coercion and fear - of the RPF and the Hutu Power extremists alike. They likewise highlighted the importance of being perceived as a 'good Hutu' during the genocide to avoid attracting the dangerous attention of the Hutu Power extremists.<sup>31</sup>

Many interviewees likewise cited instances in which they rescued Tutsi during the genocide, or otherwise tried to resist the Hutu Power extremists' efforts to exterminate those Tutsi they knew personally and did not perceive as a threat to the well-being of their communities, often at great risk to themselves and their families. There may have been a criminal purpose behind some of these alleged acts of rescue, however, as in the few instances where the *génocidaires* I interviewed claimed to have hidden strangers, these were usually young Tutsi women. These *génocidaires* expressed frustration that the women they had rescued during the genocide had refused to testify on their behalf before *gacaca*, suggesting these women may not have seen these men as rescuers, but as sexual predators - a distinct possibility given the prevalence of sexual violence during the genocide.<sup>32</sup> In terms of the family members and friends the *génocidaires* claimed to have rescued, however, it seems more likely that these acts were legitimate rescues, as the *génocidaires* often maintained relationships with them in the present. Further enhancing the accuracy of such statements, the survivors that I interviewed recounted as few as one and as many as six separate acts of rescue to which they attributed their survival of the genocide, most of which were performed by ordinary Hutu civilians - including friends, family, and strangers - and some of whom they acknowledged had also been actively involved in killing Tutsi. These acts of rescue typically included hiding Tutsi in their homes or places of

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<sup>30</sup> This was verified in several of my interviews with Tutsi survivors as well, many of whom had been forced or chose to commit atrocities in an effort to negotiate their survival. In addition, some of the survivors I interviewed considered their abandonment of loved ones during the genocide as criminal and a source of deep emotional distress, even though such acts were typically a necessity, once again, to ensure they were able to escape their attackers.

<sup>31</sup> These findings are largely upheld by the work of others who have studied Rwanda's *génocidaires*, including Scott Straus (2006), Lee Ann Fujii (2009), and Charles Mironko (2004).

<sup>32</sup> For more on the sexual and gender-based violence that occurred during the Rwandan genocide, see Baines (2003); Degni-Ségui (1996) and Taylor (1999).

business, as well as providing food, water, and medical treatment, and occurred in addition to the more publicly acceptable narrative of rescue at the hands of the advancing RPA troops.

As a starting point for better approaching the diversity of *génocidaires*' experiences, I have therefore settled on framing them, as well as other cohorts within Rwandan society who have intimate experiences of the genocide, as 'complex political actors' (Jessee 2017, 119). This framework is derived in the first instance from Erica Bouris' work on the 'complex political victim', an individual who

knowingly and purposefully supports certain discourses that contribute to the space of her political victimization. This is neither because she wants to be victimized, nor because she has "given up hope" and resorted to supporting these discourses because of a lack of better options, nor because she has made a "rational choice" to support this discourse. Rather, the complex political victim supports these propitious discourses because they construct her identity in other ways beyond the identity of a victim. Furthermore, these are identities that she values, and she does not want to be undone by the deconstruction of these propitious discourses (Bouris 2010, 84).

Erin Baines (2009, 13) subsequently applied Bouris' work to her analysis of the complexities inherent in the atrocities perpetrated by child soldiers' in northern Uganda during the 20-year civil war, resulting in the emergence of what she termed the 'complex political perpetrator'. Drawing upon the case of Dominic Ongwen - a young man who had been abducted as a child into the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) only to later be indicted by the International Criminal Court for crimes against humanity and war crimes he perpetrated as commander within the movement. Baines argues that Ongwen's crimes, while grave, must be simultaneously understood as the actions of an individual who is simultaneously a victim of the contemporary political landscape in northern Uganda. While he committed numerous atrocities against the people of northern Uganda, he was abducted as a child and forced to adapt to the hostile culture of the LRA in order to survive. Baines argues that the choiceless nature of his actions, therefore, must be taken into account to make sense of the atrocities he perpetrated and determine an appropriate sentence.

As a starting point toward better comprehending and representing Rwandans' diverse actions surrounding the Rwandan genocide, I have merged Bouris' and Baines' ideas to move away from the categorization of Rwandans according to the false dichotomy of victim/survivor and perpetrator/*génocidaire* to consider Rwandans as complex political actors. This framing creates space for analysis of the individual circumstances that informed *génocidaires*' actions - both real and perceived - surrounding the genocide, and the manner in which people frequently switched between framing themselves as victims, survivors, bystanders, and perpetrators, for example, at different points surrounding the genocide in response to the broader social, political and historical circumstances that surrounded them in any given moment.

Understandably, this approach can elicit a negative reaction from people - particularly Rwandan survivors, and scholars and practitioners who work with survivors in other post-genocide settings - on the grounds that using the same theoretical starting point to understand how Rwandan victims and perpetrators make sense of their actions surrounding the genocide risks minimizing perpetrators' criminal actions and making their alleged suffering and claims to victim, rescuer, and other problematic identities morally equivalent to those of their victims. While a valid concern, with careful contextualization of perpetrators' narratives in the manner I have demonstrated above, it becomes possible to better understand not only how and why people decide to participate in mass atrocities, but also how they come to make sense of their

crimes in the aftermath. It similarly allows for discussion of the extent to which individuals who have been labelled perpetrators may also have simultaneously acted as rescuers or been victimized by the violence in which they were embedded at different points surrounding genocide, among other relevant experiences. This in turn allows us to regard individual perpetrators as occupying different positions across a broad spectrum of perpetration, rather than perceiving them solely and over-simplistically as monsters. Additionally, even in instances where their accounts cannot be verified as historically or legally accurate, the narratives can speak volumes about what perpetrators hold to be psychologically true in the aftermath of genocide. This is particularly important for evaluating the extent to which transitional justice programs are effectively promoting social repair and reconciliation, as well as the potential for future conflict in their communities.

There are additional benefits of framing perpetrators as complex political actors as well. Considering perpetrators solely in terms of their criminal actions can, in many post-conflict settings, place the researcher at risk of supporting the highly politicized post-conflict narratives of insecure regimes that limit genuine political expression or opposition, and otherwise impede their citizens' civil liberties. This has certainly been seen in modern Rwanda, where scholars largely agree that the RPF's official narrative of the genocide is contributing to an underlying reservoir of ethnic and political tensions that raises concerns regarding the prospect of future mass atrocities in the country.<sup>33</sup>

This brings us back to the subject of present-day Rwanda. While there are occasional clear cases of innocent victims and guilty perpetrators surrounding the genocide, most Rwandans understand their actions and those of their compatriots in much more complicated terms, making such labels inaccurate and at times painful for people to negotiate given the political and social capital associated with them. Unfortunately, there appears to be little space within present-day Rwanda for the proliferation of different stories that would discuss these complexities in a meaningful way. Certainly, the RPF maintains that Rwanda's recent genocidal past makes its long-term political stability uncertain, requiring authoritarian leadership, limited democratic reforms, and reduced limited civil liberties until Rwandans come to view each other according to their shared national heritage, rather than ethnicity. However, there is an arrogance to this position - one that treats peasant Rwandans as incapable of reason and empathy across ethnic divides, and requiring a strong hand in order to avoid future bloodshed. Among the peasant Rwandans I interviewed, most lived in densely populated and tightly-knit communities. For this reason, they demonstrated a striking degree of awareness of their neighbours actions' surrounding the genocide, as well as throughout other periods of Rwanda's past. Personal narratives of the complexities of the genocide proliferated in private settings, highlighting tensions between ordinary Rwandans' experiences and the RPF's official narrative, even if the subjects could not be discussed openly. Furthermore, one sentiment that was expressed by all participants, regardless of ethnicity or political affiliation, was the desire to avoid future bloodshed. Given this common goal, and the widespread awareness of the different ways that Rwandans from different regions, clan lineages, and ethnic groups, for example, had been disadvantaged at different points in Rwanda's past, there may be fertile ground for peaceful public discussion of Rwandans as complex political actors surrounding the genocide.

## **6. Conclusion**

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<sup>33</sup> See for example, Longman (2011), Purdeková (2011), Reyntjens (2004), Reyntjens (2015), and Vidal (2004).



This chapter has examined the life histories of three convicted *génocidaires* - Michel, Devota, and Elliot - with the purpose of analysing the construction and politicization of the concept of 'perpetrator' in post-genocide Rwanda period. While their life histories differed in important ways, Michel, Devota, and Elliot largely rejected the label of perpetrator, even though they admitted having either directly perpetrated or having been bystanders to violent crimes during the genocide. In each case, they held as psychologically true the belief that their crimes - both real and alleged - had been determined by a complicated interplay of historical, political, social and personal circumstances over which they, as civilians, had little control. Furthermore, they shared the sense that to focus on their crimes surrounding the genocide failed to take into account the diverse range of actions in which they had engaged; most notably, the ways in which they too were victims of political violence during the civil war and genocide, or the efforts they had made to rescue Tutsi they knew were innocent. To this end, they unanimously recognized that the RPF's decision to hold them legally accountable for their crimes was as much politically motivated as it was a matter of necessity for promoting national unity and reconciliation. And as a result, they all expressed misgivings that the RPF was capable of ensuring long-term political stability in Rwanda.

While these findings offer critical insights for present understandings of the 1994 genocide and its aftermath, they also have a broader importance for the growing literature on perpetrator studies, more generally. While the factual accuracy of perpetrators' life histories can be questioned due to individual narrators' inability to fully accept the atrocities they committed, their desire to minimize their criminal responsibility and subsequent sentencing, or manipulate the researcher's understanding of the conflict, for example, their narratives can nonetheless be helpful for revealing what they hold to be psychologically true. In particular, they can tell researchers a great deal about how convicted *génocidaires* make sense of their crimes, often in conversation with the particular transitional justice mechanisms that are introduced to promote legal accountability and social repair in the post-conflict period. Central to this is the realization that the perpetrator label and the political and legal processes through which individuals come to be labelled perpetrators may not adequately encapsulate the range of actions in which people engage surrounding conflicts. Likewise, the perpetrator label glosses over the often choiceless decisions through which ordinary civilians may be compelled to participate in genocide and related mass atrocities, even in instances where they are indifferent to or overtly reject the ideologies that are motivating the violence.

As a starting point toward addressing these limitations, I have argued that framing perpetrators as complex political actors can create space for analysis of the individual circumstances that informed a person's actions - both real and perceived - surrounding genocide and related mass atrocities. It allows researchers to consider the full range of people's actions surrounding conflict, including not only the free will they may have exercised in committing atrocities, but the ways in which they may also have been victims of, bystanders to, and resisters against the violence that engulfed them at different points in time. The resulting insights can leave researchers better positioned to critically assess the often competing personal and official narratives that tend to proliferate in the aftermath of conflict, resulting in more reliable insights into such critical topics as how atrocities took shape within a given community, why some civilians ultimately chose to take part in the violence, and how best to pursue genuine social repair, among other common conflict prevention and transitional justice objectives.

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